

Guest Opinion

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Idaho's TechConnect Program Helps Entrepreneurs Succeed

By Ray Barnes, Director of Technology Transfer and Commercialization at the Idaho National Laboratory

Meet Becky Logue. In 2002, Becky developed a foot-operated computer mouse that allows hands-free data entry while dental office procedures are being done.

Becky, a practicing dental hygienist, designed the product and had the first batch manufactured under the name Beckmer Products Inc. Marketing wasn't her area of expertise and sales were slow. She kept her full time job and wondered how entrepreneurs succeed when getting a company launched is so difficult.

In 2005, Becky learned about Idaho's TechConnect assistance and got a crash course - along with hands-on assistance -- in everything from developing a business plan to marketing. TechConnect helped her launch two international market studies, one in Europe and one in Canada, to determine the sales potential there.

Participating in TechConnect's annual TechLaunch program, which helps emerging firms connect to funding resources, also opened doors Becky didn't realize were available. The company - which can be found at www.dentalrat.com -- now has launched an Idaho stock offering.

This year, she plans to hire her first employees and launch a national marketing plan to further expand the business.

This is a story repeated hundreds of times in Idaho. Often, whether a new company succeeds or fails has less to do with the entrepreneur's product or passion than it does with the first-time entrepreneur's lack of understanding the resources needed to succeed with a new product, and assistance in connecting with those resources.

Idaho has three TechConnect offices - in Nampa, Idaho Falls and Post Falls -- that provide specialized help for start-up companies. Since 2002, when the offices were formed, scores of companies have been helped throughout the state of Idaho.

Helping our home-grown businesses get established and grow is a critical part of economic development. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, most new job creation in the country is from new and small businesses.

Technology businesses that succeed grow faster and pay more than the average business and it is to our advantage to encourage this sector.

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TechConnect offices are offices without walls, meaning staff provides assistance in large regional areas - making business creation even more feasible in rural Idaho areas. We are encouraged at the success of these offices and want to build on those successes. Currently, funding for these offices is not secure.

On Friday, Feb. 24, the Legislature's Joint Finance Appropriations Committee will review a funding request for this program. We need to establish this funding backbone for TechConnect so their necessary services can continue and expand.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne has called on the Legislature to approve \$300,000 a year for five years to provide that funding. This is also one of the proposals initiated and backed by the Governor's Science & Technology Advisory Council, a group comprised of prominent leaders in Idaho's science and technology community. This funding would not only guarantee the continuance of services in the three existing regions, it would also add an office in Twin Falls.

In 2005, the TechConnect organization took on an even more challenging charter: To seek private funding that would enable start-up grants to emerging firms. The organization recently recruited a group of impressive individuals for a statewide board that will oversee this fund-raising and grant process.

This next stage will emerge over the coming year, with private industry joining in these exciting future initiatives. We look to the state of Idaho to be our partner in this endeavor, solidifying the basic funding for this program so it can move forward.

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Ray Barnes chaired the Interim Board of Directors of Idaho TechConnect and is the Director of Technology Transfer and Commercialization at the Idaho National Laboratory. He can be reached at ray.barnes@inl.gov.